

University of Dundee

## Can social work education meet the neoliberal challenge head on?

Fenton, Jane

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# Can social work education meet the neo-liberal challenge head on?

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## Introduction

This paper attempts to illuminate whether social work is losing its fundamental connection to social justice. The International Federation of Social Work's definition of social work, clearly states that the profession should be centrally concerned with issues of social justice:

"The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work" (IFSW, 2012, p1).

The above definition leads to social justice featuring on the curriculum of social work qualifying courses and to the understanding of social justice featuring as a prerequisite for attaining a social work degree. For example, in Scotland the *Standards in Social Work Education* state that social work students must 'act effectively with others to promote social justice by identifying and responding to prejudice, institutional discrimination and structural inequality' (Scottish Government, 2003, p x). In England, *The Professional Capabilities Framework* (College of social work, 2012, np) state that by the end of their final placement students must be able to 'Understand, identify and apply in practice the principles of social justice, inclusion and equality.'

It is clear from the above, then, that the emphasis on social justice in social work is still central, even whilst the practice context of social work has changed and developed. Much has been written about the 'managerial' and neo-liberal culture of contemporary social work, and the current pre-occupation with accountability, targets, risk assessment, individual level interventions and management (for example, Ferguson, 2008), and yet students and workers are still required to attend to issues of social justice within that framework. The question is, therefore, can the social work profession retain its commitment to social justice in the light of those developments?

## The Study

The findings under discussion in this paper are taken from a wider study of criminal justice social workers (CJSW) in Scotland (Author's Own, 2014). The study looked at whether certain features of the practice context of CJSW contributed significantly to workers' experience of ethical stress. Ethical stress is a concept defined by the stress experienced when workers cannot base their practice on their values, or feel they cannot do the 'right thing.' Ethical stress comprises two dimensions, the first being practice based stress when elements of the practice context hinder value based practice. Di Franks described this as 'disjuncture' (Di Franks, 2008). The second dimension is characterized by 'ontological guilt' which is the corrosive state of having to practise in a way that is incongruent with one's conscience or in a way that does not feel 'right' (Taylor, 2007). Both of these dimensions are complementary and interdependent aspects of ethical stress. In the study, questions were asked pertaining to both dimensions which then gave an overall measure of the ethical stress experienced by the worker. To check that the final question scale had internal consistency, the Cronbach's coefficient alpha for the scale was ascertained using SPSS for Windows 2007. The ethical stress scale produced a Cronbach's coefficient alpha of .817 which demonstrates good internal consistency (Fischer and Corcoran, 2007). In effect, this means that the questions in the scale are, in fact, tapping into the same phenomenon – in this case ethical stress. 100 completed, usable questionnaires were returned from across four local authorities.

The study then looked at whether the independent variables, drawn from a review of the literature (Author's Own, 2012), had a significant impact on the experience of ethical stress. The variables were:

1. The approach to working with offenders. The hypothesis was that the more an agency relied on standardized, manualised programmes of 'work,' the more ethical stress would be experienced because there would be less opportunity or encouragement for responsive, 'helping' responses.
2. Risk aversion. It was hypothesized that the more risk averse the agency was perceived to be, the more ethical stress would be experienced, again, because it is more difficult to be responsive and to 'help' when it feels like the right thing to do, in a risk averse climate.
3. Ethical climate. This comprised responsive and supportive supervision, manageable workloads, discussion of values, values having a place in decision making and participative decision making. Again, it was hypothesized that the less 'value-friendly' the ethical climate was, the more ethical stress would be experienced.

For further information on the study, see Author's Own (2014).

For the purposes of the current discussion, it is important that the variables, although specific to CJSW, can be demonstrably linked to indicators of neo-liberal practice in social work more widely. It is suggested that the higher the variables are scored by social workers, the more neo-liberal the workers are viewing their workplace practices to be, so it's important that the connections between the variables and neo-liberal ideology are clear.

### The approach to working with offenders

This variable measured the approach the agency took to working with offenders on a spectrum from desistance based, 'helping,' welfare orientated approaches to proceduralised, manualised, cognitive-behavioural, stand-alone groupwork approaches. At the extreme end of the scale, there is minimal space to do responsive, helping type work associated with traditional social work. This variable links to neo-liberal thinking in several ways. Firstly, the idea that the individual is solely responsible for

the circumstances he finds himself in, and must take responsibility for that. Secondly, that recourse to explanations of poverty, unemployment or disadvantage is merely an excuse (Webb, 2006). The consequence of both of those ideas is that the person who has offended must be 'corrected' and brought into line in order to comply and maintain the status quo (Garland, 2001). Thirdly, notions that welfare and help for people should be maximized are shunned, because in neo-liberal thinking, welfare and dependency are abhorred and replaced by individual responsibility, management and compliance with the rules (Kemshall, 2010). Helping offenders with their circumstances is also incompatible with the idea that people should be punished more severely, again to secure compliance with the rules (McNeill, 2004). Clearly then, as scores increase on this variable, so does the neo-liberal characterization of the approach to the work taken by the agency.

### Risk aversion

Webb (2006) states that the preoccupation with risk assessment and management and neo-liberalism are intrinsically linked. He explains that the 'old' welfare society based on universal care has been replaced by an onslaught of individualistic market forces, within which welfare is viewed very negatively. He suggests that, in this context, people must join in with a middle-class work ethic or become left behind as a result of their own failings. Notions of underclass (Murray, 1990) feature in this thinking as does the priority for criminal justice agencies to *manage* this group of risky people and protect others from them. Herein lies the preoccupation with risk assessment and management and 'getting it right' in public protection terms. As soon as public protection is a stated aim, however, social work opens itself up to certain failure due to the impossibility of making completely accurate predications (McNeill, 2009, Littlechild, 2010). Therein lies the temptation to practice in a risk averse manner, for the protection of the agency rather than the good of the service user. It can be suggested, then, that risk aversion practice is another feature of a neo-liberal practice context. For a fuller discussion of this, see Author's Own (2013).

### Ethical climate

The questions pertaining to this variable concerned how managerial and 'value-empty' the agency is perceived to be. If an agency is viewed as being overly concerned with targets, performance indicators and efficiency measures, at the expense of actual face-to-face work with service users, it can be suggested that the agency is operating in a managerial way (Littlechild, 2010). This combined with minimal values discussion or little consideration of values in decision making, procedural and managerial supervision and heavy workloads to be worked through efficiently (leaving little time for welfare or helping work) leads to the perception of poor ethical climates. These characteristics are also congruent with neo-liberal thinking in regards to efficient management of the risky population of offenders, disregard of the grim realities of people's lives and a preoccupation with demonstrating diligence through completed paperwork and bureaucratic imperatives (Ferguson, 2008).

In summary, it can be confidently suggested that the variables, although measuring specific characteristics of CJSW, are also measures of neo-liberal ideology.

### Findings

The research study, in summary, found that the more risk averse the agency and value-poor the ethical climate was perceived by workers to be, the more ethical stress was experienced. The

approach to working with offenders, however, did not affect the experience of ethical stress, mainly because all respondents were remarkably clear that public protection and risk assessment and management were absolutely the priority tasks. Welfare and helping work could be done if there was time, and if the individual worker felt so inclined. It seems that this approach to the work per se, which is exactly congruent with the direction from the Scottish Government (Scottish Government, 2010), was not experienced as an ethical problem. Only when the ethical climate and risk aversion of the agency hampered any welfare work a social worker wanted to do, did ethical stress result (Author's Own, 2014).

The current paper, however, is concerned with a specific and unexpected finding of the research study. The finding that emerged from the data, was that years of experience in CJSW and age of respondent seemed to be having an impact on the way workers interpreted the variables. To investigate this further, correlations between years of experience and the four variables were undertaken. As scores on the variables increased, the view of the variables moved closer to a perception that the work was more procedural, less individually responsive, more risk averse, less value-friendly and, as discussed above, more neo-liberal. As scores for ethical stress increased, the experience of ethical stress became more acute. In other words, if more experienced workers viewed these aspects of the work as more restrictive in nature, they would score them more highly and, thus, scores would be correlated with experience. Years of experience would also be correlated with scores for ethical stress if more experienced workers suffered more from this phenomenon. Results are shown in Table 1:

**Table 1: Correlations between years of experience and the 4 variables**

	Pearson Correlation	Strength of Correlation	Significance
Years of Experience and How we work with offenders	.461	Med/Large	p=.000
Years of Experience and ethical climate	.465	Med/Large	p=.000
Years of experience and approach to risk	.541	Large	p=.000
Years of Experience and ethical stress	.423	Med/Large	p=.000

Clearly, as years of experience increased, so did scores on all variables to a highly significant degree. This means that how neo-liberal a worker found the workplace to be was significantly linked to how experienced they were. However, it should be noted that age may also have had an impact, as more experienced workers tend to be older. Therefore, a second correlation was used to explore the relationship between age and the four variables. Results are shown in Table 2:

**Table 2: Correlations between age and the 4 variables**

	Pearson Correlation	Strength of Correlation	Significance
Age and How we work with offenders	.417	Medium	p=.000
Age and ethical climate	.401	Medium	p=.000
Age and approach to risk	.463	Med/Large	p=.000
Age and ethical stress	.323	Small/Med	P=.001

Therefore, age was also significantly correlated with how workers viewed all of the above variables, *especially* how the agency approach to risk was viewed. It appears that both age and years of experience were significant features in a worker's view on the neo-liberal and managerial nature of CJSW. Younger, less experienced workers viewed their agencies as less risk averse, less restrictive in the work done and more value friendly. They also suffered less ethical stress as a result.

Risk aversion was the most highly correlated with both age and experience, and included questions about the agency's perspective on workers having autonomy. Risk averse agencies presumably do not 'allow' their workers the level of autonomy and discretion that more 'risk accepting' cultures might. In the light of the above findings, then, we would expect to find that more experienced workers also find the lack of autonomy frustrating. In answer to the question 'I wish I had more autonomy,' a significant medium/large correlation was found between scores and years of experience,  $r=.428$ ,  $n=100$ ,  $p=.000$ . A significant medium correlation was also found between age and the same question, that is,  $r=.306$ ,  $n=100$ ,  $p=.002$ .

In essence, in the current study, older, more experienced workers are significantly less happy and object significantly more to the contemporary neo-liberal informed context of CJSW, including more prescriptive work with service users and less opportunity for relationship building, more risk aversion, less autonomy, more reliance on procedures and values taking less prominence with the cultural landscape. Younger, less experienced workers appear to accept this context far less critically.

## Discussion

### Context

Ferguson (2008) comprehensively explores the advancement of neo-liberalism as a political ideology, and examines the impact of that ideology on the social work profession. In essence, 'neo-

liberal social work...undermines not only radical or structural approaches, but also 'traditional' relationship-based social work,' (Ferguson, 2008, p14). The respondents in the study felt more ethically stressed when the ethical climate, including workloads and the emphasis on paperwork, and the risk averse approach of the agency thwarted the worker's desire to build a relationship with the service user and to work directly with them. Although the stress this generated was more acute for older, more experienced workers, this element of neo-liberalism was a source of frustration for all respondents and resonates with Ferguson's assertion that neo-liberalism has undermined traditional, relationship-based practice. The undermining of 'radical or structural' approaches, however, did not feature in any of the comments, as the emphasis in the respondents' comments was overwhelmingly on the expression of individual level values, getting to know the service users and helping them make changes (Author's Own, 2014). The overall theme of the study's findings, therefore, was quite congruent with the neo-liberal emphasis on individual change, social workers across the age span being concerned with this to the exclusion of structural, social justice concerns. As Sheedy (2013, p18) notes in relation to neo-liberalism, 'the neo-liberal (neo conservative) paradigm espouses.....surveillance and social control of the poor and other deviants.' This, then, translates into working on change for the *individual* only, helping them comply with the rules of the existing structure. In CJSW this translates into programmes of cognitive-behavioural work and narrow conceptions of correctional work (McNeill, 2004).

So, overall, the respondents are somewhat 'buying in' to neo-liberal thinking by only focusing on individual level issues for interventions, but *within that overarching neo-liberal shift*, younger, less experienced workers are 'buying in' significantly more. Sheedy (2013, p6) notes that many social work students, who become the newer workers of tomorrow, have little knowledge of politics or 'more worryingly, no interest in politics.' Sheedy goes on to say that the danger in this is that people will focus only on "helping people" to the exclusion of consideration of the broader contexts within which this vocational task is carried out' (ibid). This appears to be the phenomenon that has played out in the current study and which is summed up by Lorenz (2005, np) as follows:

In view of these pressures [neo-liberal changes] it is understandable that social workers often try to ignore these changes and withdraw into a private world of therapeutic relationships in which the methods they trained in are made to be still valid, or they simply go along with new service designs without asking too many questions.

So, the study has perhaps illuminated a picture of social workers' reactions to neo-liberal changes in that, in terms of values, the focus for the whole group of respondents was on 'the private world of therapeutic relationships.' However, even within individual level work, older more experienced workers are experiencing neo-liberal restrictions on relationship based practice as significantly more frustrating than their younger, less experienced counterparts. In light of the finding that younger, less experienced workers also object significantly less to wider neo-liberal developments (as encapsulated within the other variables), Lorenz's assertion above about workers not asking 'too many questions,' is an explanation which might be more compelling in relation to those who were brought up in an era when neo-liberal ideology hegemony was taking hold i.e. what questions are there to ask?

Gilligan (2007) sheds some light on the above issue, by suggesting that people use 'frames' to understand the world. He states that 'the styles of practice adopted by new practitioners are not

only the product of what they are taught, but also of how they interpret this teaching through the cultural frames they brought with them and of how successfully these are confirmed or challenged by qualifying programmes' (Gilligan, 2007, p736). Gilligan studied 148 responses to a written task set for applicants to a single university in the UK. The applicant was tasked with responding to a question asking them to identify a social problem and to discuss the causes and origins of the problem. According to Gilligan, age had an important influence on how applicants responded. He states that 'the two oldest groups and the very youngest group were the most likely to suggest 'social' causes, whereas those aged between 20 and 34 years were the most likely to suggest 'individual causes' (ibid. P750). Gilligan speculates that 'the oldest group (born 1952-1965) fall into an age range which not only mirrors that of the youngest group's parents, but also that of many social work teachers and academics. All will have reached their adolescence before Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979.....The contrasting group (born 1969 – 84) are from an age-group which has frequently been referred to as 'Thatcher's Children' (p 750). In relation to the current study, although impossible to make definitive connections, a similar pattern can be seen. It is unlikely that members of Gilligan's 'youngest group' featured within the sample of CJ social workers studied, so the difference between younger and older workers appears to be what Gilligan saw playing out in the differences he found between the 'Thatcher's Children' group and the two oldest groups.

The majority of respondents in Gilligan's study and, in particular, the 'Thatcher's children' group, were more likely to pin point individual causes of social problems. The study did concern students at the application stage, so it could be argued that they had not yet been educated into understanding the social basis of problems. However, Gilligan might counter-argue that the student's pre existing 'frame' is extremely powerful unless the education process can significantly impact upon it, and, according to the results of the current study, newer workers are entering the profession still referring to individualistic frames of reference, significantly more so than their older counterparts. As Gilligan says:

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, recruits to British social work appear far less critical of the society in which they live than many in social work practice and education would want them to be. Hence there is a clear danger that the profession's approach to government's social policies will become increasingly uncritical and that even more social workers will come to see their role as little more than management of 'unacceptable' behaviour by individuals and age groups' (Gilligan, 2007, p755).

According to the results of the current study, this seems to be exactly what has happened.

### **Social work education and social justice**

It seems from the above then, and from the results of the study, that there is an issue for social work education in relation to helping students understand and internalise the importance of social justice, and to move beyond individual-level, neo-liberal notions of social work. The requirement to do this is an expectation in the standards of social work education as discussed in the introduction, so why are social workers entering the profession without that strong commitment?

Lafrance et al (2004) raise the problematic issue of social work programmes failing students for non-academic reasons. The authors suggest that clearer criteria in regards to issues such as personal qualities need to exist so that social work educators feel confident in terminating students for those



reasons. As well as a lack of clear criteria, Lafrance et al also note that there is an ethical tension for social work educators because 'in a profession that espouses the basic value that all people are capable of growth and change, can we justify excluding people who may be unready rather than unsuitable?' (p326). Notwithstanding those difficulties, the authors undertook a study with field practice educators to identify the non-academic requirements they had of students. One of the main criteria concerned the student's commitment to social justice. The majority of the educators felt that students must demonstrate a political awareness and possess an ability to think critically about the social environment of the people they are working with. They needed to understand social justice. However, this is one of the areas identified by the authors as requiring more explicit acknowledgement as a *requirement* for practice, implying that the requirement in the standards is maybe insufficient when it comes to practice placements. The practice educators felt concerned that 'too many social workers' had become too easily aligned to the system that employs them and overly concerned with the bureaucracy and processes of that system, rather than concerned with the service users. As Sheedy (2013, p3) states, being concerned with 'doing things right', rather than 'doing the right thing.'

Woodward and MacKay (2013) examined the understanding and application of values in a cohort of Scottish students at point of entry to the programme, and one year on. They used Higham's (2006) categorisation of values: individual level, structural level and emancipatory level. The researchers found that the students were able to apply individual level values more easily than either structural or emancipatory values. One year into their course, most students could recognise structural, social justice issues, but were still weak on applying that to their practice.

There is a theme, then, emerging from the literature that social work students struggle to *apply* understanding of social justice to their practice. In the absence of the knowledge of how to do that, students appear to 'fall back' on the practicalities of the doing the task (Woodward and Mackay, 2013), on the 'frames' they have internalised from the hegemony of neo-liberal society (Gilligan, 2007) or on individual level values and interventions (Author's Own, 2014, Sheedy, 2013). All of these responses are congruent with an uncritical acceptance of neo-liberal, managerial social work. Also, social work education struggles to measure whether students should be deemed 'not good enough' on the basis of weakness around understanding and application of social justice, so students who are poor in this regard often still qualify.

### **Social work education: meeting the neo-liberal challenge?**

Doel (2012, p27) discusses two interpretations of social justice, which may illuminate the situation further: 'The reformist wing of social work subscribes to equal opportunity, but the radical and social democratic wing goes further towards redistributive justice, for example using progressive taxation to reallocate wealth in society.' So, within social work itself, there are competing understandings of social justice. The reformist definition can be interpreted within neo-liberal thinking relatively easily, in that if people are given equal opportunity, then progress or success is the responsibility of the individual. It follows that failure is, therefore, also an individual responsibility. Within an interpretation of this which uncritically accepts that our society has universal access to education, health and employment and has laws forbidding discrimination, a corrections-based or compliance form of social work can be rationalised. Might it be, then, that promoting a more radical approach to social justice and highlighting this explicitly in social work

education might be a way of balancing the scales in the face of weighty and powerful neo-liberalism?

If social justice is defined in explicitly radical terms as a push for the fairer distribution of resources, because the unfair distribution of resources is the principle underpinning cause of social problems, then social work is taking a politically left wing and socially democratic ideological stance. Social work, in the face of criticisms about political bias which can be as strong as to be defined as 'academically scandalous behaviour' (NAS, 2007, np), seems to be understandably wary about expressing this. However, it is difficult to see how students can fulfil the essential requirement to 'understand, identify and apply in practice the principles of social justice, inclusion and equality' (College of Social Work, 2012) or to 'respond...to....structural inequality' (Scottish Government, 2003, px) if they actually believe, or have a 'frame,' which uncritically accepts that society is fair and benevolent and, consequently, believe that any 'problem' is almost solely located within the individual.

A fundamental understanding about unequal distribution of resources, or structural discrimination, gives a clear and explicit direction for the *application* of that understanding. Such application would play out in a practice concerned with understanding why and how a person's life had unfolded in the way it had (which is an intrinsic part of relationship building) and interventions based on helping with welfare and structural disadvantage; maximising benefit, helping with employment, accessing mutual support groups, helping with relationship building, links with the community, education, housing, advocacy and the reality of the individual's social context. Even this relatively basic and unsophisticated interpretation of social justice within practice would be welcome. Looking at the results of the current study, minimal mention of any concern with welfare and social justice issues suggests that even this basic type of practice is being very much eroded. Without a social justice heart to the work, social work is becoming the 'unthinking servant of social policy' (Lorenz, 2005, np).

O'Brien (2011) undertook a study of social workers in New Zealand and asked them to describe examples of practice where social justice thinking was applied. He found that, although most examples were also rooted in individual and family work, the workers were able to make connections to social justice in terms of helping with access to resources, advocacy etc. This, then, gives another avenue for individual level, but socially just, practice; that is *connecting* the social work practice to the areas of oppression, discrimination and disadvantage and fighting that with, and on behalf of, service users. Of course, several factors must exist in order for this to happen: workers must understand and believe in social justice; the agency setting must encourage, or at least not discourage, this type of emancipatory work; and workers must have a strong sense of this as an important and fundamental element of their professional identity. In the current study, many comments were made about agencies not encouraging relationship based, 'helping' type of work with service users so this pre-requisite cannot be taken for granted. However, results also showed that worker *choice* and *inclination* to become involved in this type of work was variable, as was the ethical climate of the particular agency, both of which can be influenced by the social justice beliefs of workers.

So, given that the younger, newer workers in the study were the ones who had a less critical stance in relation to neo-liberal developments within CJSW, and felt significantly less ethical stress when

thwarted in doing the type of work outlined by O'Brien, this paper is suggesting that social work education is producing new workers who often lack the commitment to social justice. Some illumination of this problem is presented by Funge (2013) who undertook a study of social work academics and asked them to respond to four primary questions including, 'Can or should social work educators ensure that students align their practice orientation with their ethical responsibility to promote social justice?' (Funge, 2013, p81). The study states that a number of respondents balked at the idea that they should 'ensure' a social justice orientation. These respondents believed that this 'was neither an achievable nor a desirable objective for social work education' (ibid). Nine out of the thirteen interviewees felt this, stating that their job was to *expose* social work students to ideas of social justice, in the hope that students would absorb the ideas. Only four of the respondents felt that it was their duty to actively cultivate a social justice orientation in students. This study was carried out in the US, and on a small sample of academics, however it is suggested that the tension it highlights is not unique to the US.

More hearteningly, Canavan (2009, p 48) studied a 'flexible learning programme' in a Northern Ireland social work programme and found that, through an approach including discussion and critical analysis, and the use of real practitioners who could help with demonstrating social justice in action, the students reported real gains in their understanding and application of social justice. For example, students moved from 'the sociology and social policy modules teach us about the history and theory of poverty and inequality, but nothing about how this directly impacts on our practice' to 'you have talked about the impact of poverty on the lives of service users and what *that may mean for us in developing working relationships with them*. This is the first time that the focus on poverty has made sense' (Canavan, 2009, p59).

As discussed earlier, the problem for students appears to be two fold: do students have a real *belief* in social justice as relevant to practice, which is essential if students are to meet the requirement to 'promote' social justice; and can students *apply* an understanding of social justice thinking to practice. In relation to the first point, educators in Canavan's study took a much more engaged stance in ensuring a social justice alignment. For example, Canavan rejects the assumption that 'a coherent professional identity [with social justice at its heart] will emerge organically as an inevitable corollary of a broader generic process of professional socialisation' (Canavan, 2009, p48). He states that the crisis in social work identity very much challenges that, and supports an approach designed to strengthen the 'participants' knowledge of the economic determinants of social justice, linked to an explicit anti-poverty practice focus, 'that is, an explicit alignment with a radical interpretation of social justice (Canavan, 2009, p62). It is this 'explicit alignment' which is missing from the approach taken by the workers in Funge's study. Canavan also found that an absolute focus on the links between social justice concepts and actual daily practice meant that students absorbed not just why social justice is important but what it meant in terms of application.

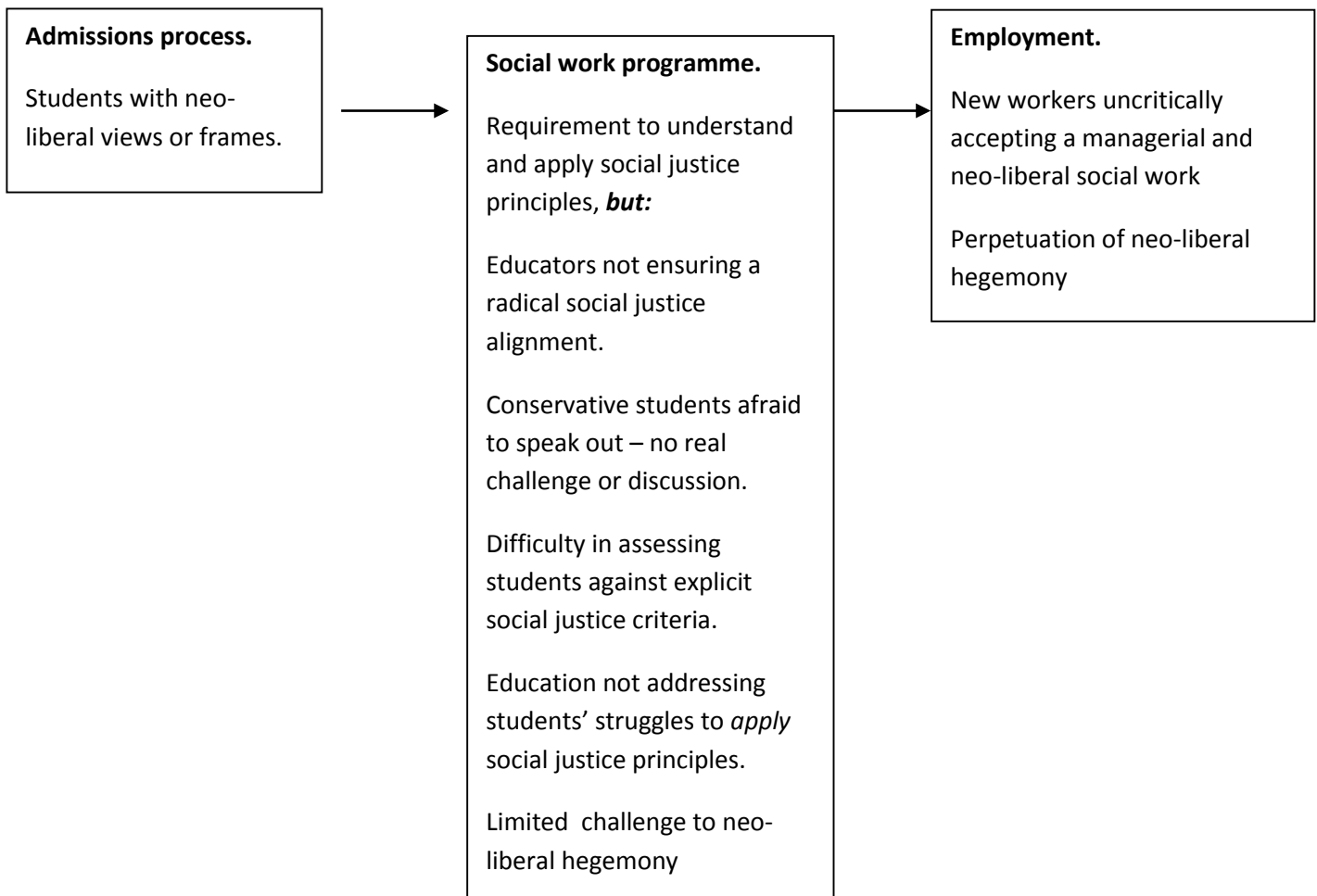
Thus far, then, it seems that something needs to be done if social work education is to stop producing social workers who go along with neo-liberal hegemony uncritically and unthinkingly. It needs to focus significantly on, not just teaching the theories around social justice, but on the application of that to actual practice. Also, social work education perhaps needs to be braver in its explicit alignment with a radical social justice ideology with its central tenets of equality of distribution of resources as well as opportunity. It may be that students who cannot ideologically align themselves with that are actually missing the fundamentals of being a 'good enough' social

worker, and should not qualify. In a study looking at perspectives of being on the receiving end of social justice teaching, Flaherty et al (2013) found that conservative students, in class, were more likely to feel discriminated against for their views, were more likely to self censor and were less likely to view the classroom as a conducive setting for such discussion. So, conservative students experience the social democratic, social justice promoting ethos of social work education as oppressive, even when the educators in Funge's study felt they did not try to ensure compliance with these political and social justice viewpoints, and when social work education more broadly expects only the organic emergence of a social justice alignment.

Social work education is, then, stuck between a rock and a hard place. If educators do not try to 'ensure' students have a social justice alignment, then students may well complete their studies and enter the social work profession adhering to original neo-liberal frames of reference, as per the younger, less experienced social workers in the current study. On the other hand, students who have more explicit neo-liberal beliefs, still feel discriminated against, even when the expectation of social justice alignment is diluted, and feel they cannot air their views and cannot talk openly. For these students 'keeping their heads down' and getting through their course will be the ultimate aim, rather than engaging in real, open and challenging debate which might change their thinking. Add to this picture the idea that failure to adopt a social justice alignment should be a reason for failing, then these students have even *more* reason for keeping their views to themselves.

The above situation may be somewhat illuminated by Slater (2012) who describes how neo-liberal hegemony, absorbed by many students, is assisted by powerful messages which deliberately neglect contradictory explanations and knowledge. Slater explores the role of the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), who coined the phrase 'Broken Britain' and perpetuated a moral panic about 'family breakdown, educational failure, economic dependence, indebtedness and addiction' leading to an expanding 'underclass' (Slater, 2012, p7). Another key message from the CSJ was that government needed to tackle the 'something for nothing,' entitlement culture. The idea of 'conditionality' gathered momentum, that is, the idea that benefits should be earned through fulfilling conditions such as attending work preparation sessions, taking any available job and accepting mandatory work placements (unpaid voluntary work). The underlying idea is that making life as uncomfortable as possible for people will motivate them into work. The information, of course, that is missing from that account includes the profound lack of suitable jobs; many people, for example those with disability, being unable to take the jobs available; people without skills or experience having real difficulty in entering the job market; and low paid work and high costs such as child care. Instead, unemployed people are portrayed as lazy scroungers who just need their idle lifestyles to be made more difficult to get them back to work. Such is the power of three decades of this type of neo-liberal propaganda (Ferguson, 2008) that many people have internalised it as 'common sense.' In this context, it is unsurprising then that many students apply for social work programmes with these frames of reference firmly in place. If these students then enter a social work education programme which may be weak in promoting an alternative world view due to not wanting to discriminate against students holding conservative views, and due to the lack of clear and explicit radical social justice 'alignment' requirement, they are then inadequately challenged and, ultimately, enter a profession where their existing 'frames' might fit in very well. As Canavan (2009, p50) says, 'a neo-liberal re-branding of social work as an explicit mechanism of social control has gained momentum in recent decades' and the above student journey would fit very well with the perpetuation of that 're-branding.'

To illustrate this further, the process can be expressed diagrammatically as follows:



## Conclusion

In conclusion, then, what can be done? It seems that the foregoing discussion has identified some themes which might be usefully considered for social work education. Firstly, social work programmes might adopt an explicit alignment with a radical approach to social justice, beyond the requirements in various standards for social work education. Perhaps programmes need to make this explicit alignment much clearer from application stage and throughout the programme. Students entering the profession should know beforehand what the expectations are in this regard, and that narrow views of social problems as solely resting within individuals who need to be 'corrected' or managed are unacceptable. Social work programmes might require students to demonstrate openness to changing those views, an expectation congruent with the belief in students' capacity for change. Secondly, programmes must ensure that expectations are clear and opportunities for discussion, debate, exploration and application of a radical social work approach to social justice are abundant. As demonstrated by Canavan (2009), this is possible and might go some way towards engaging students in the debates rather than driving them to quietly 'keep their heads down' whilst adhering to existing neo-liberal frames. Also, programmes have a responsibility to ensure that neo-liberal hegemony and consequent underpinning assumptions are absolutely *exposed* to students, perhaps for the first time. Finally, having attempted all of the above,

programmes should be more confident in the notion that a failure to understand structural and societal causes of problems should be a reasonable basis for failing the programme.

Whilst debate about the above continues, it is important to remember that the starting point for this paper was the finding that younger, less experienced workers are significantly less critical of the current neo-liberal features of CJSW in Scotland. It is not unreasonable to suggest that this might also be the case in other social work services. Therefore, if social work education doesn't grapple with the questions raised, the resistance to neo-liberal managerialism which the profession is attempting to exert will, over time, weaken and erode significantly. This would be a desperate situation, especially when, as Lorenz (2005, np) states; 'Nothing less than a head-on challenge to the basic presuppositions of neo-liberalism....and their manifold applications to social service delivery systems, will....suffice.'

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